Adult Education

I was asked the other day by Mr.. Leonard Bercuson, Secty of the Alberta Adult Education Association, to say something on this program about Adult Education, and why a system of adequate adult education in Alberta might be a good thing.. Mr. Bercuson's request rather startled me, for I have never been in any way considered an authority on educational matters. I therefore tried to find out from Mr.. Bercuson just what he meant by adult education. " Adult education", Mr.. Bercuson informed me, " is the great ally of democracy.. Rule by the people can have meaning only so long as the people are informed.. In this complex age of ours,. a person only begins to be educated by the time he is eighteen--and then his formal schooling ends. We cannot permit the many years of adulthood to be lacking in any consistent learning. Therein lies the absurdity of choking off education at eighteen years of age, or at four o'clock in the afternoon.. " Well,. this statement by Mr.. Bercuson sounded pretty good. ~~It bore out . notion I already had that he was a young man od ideas and ideals~~.. And the more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself that what I had been doing the last few years was really adult education. Soon after I left college in 1934 I travelled eighty miles twice weekly between Lawrence Kansas and Kansas City Missouri to teach a night class in creative writing.. The class was a mixture of whites and Negros,, school teachers and laborers,

I discovered that most of them were potentially better students than I had been in college,, and that all of them had had wider personal experiences than I. I am sure I learned more from that class than it learned from me..

But whether the teacher instructs the students, or the students instruct the teacher....the idea of adult education is good. The idea was born in me at Kansas City that winter, and when I went to Cornell University a little later I had a chance to carry the idea on. There was a great teacher at Cornell named A. M. Drummond. For years he had been working to instruct the people of New York State about their region. He had encouraged Harold Thompson, the folklorist, to collect the ballads, the folktales and the sayings of the State. He had encouraged Carl Carmer and other well known writers to use the fine romantic lore of New York as a basis for their books. Professor Drummond had himself written plays about New York State, and had produced them at the State fair, and in the Cornell University Theatre. His ambition was to make the people of the State as conscious as possible of the value of their traditions, and to help bring the people of the various communities together through the common knowledge of the humor and history of the countryside. When I had completed my graduate work at Cornell I was offered a teaching position at Sweet Briar College in the Shenondoah Valley in Virginia.....a truly heavely place. I anticipated a quiet life in the easy-going South. But when I showed the offer to Mr. Drummond he said " who told you to apply for a job?" " Well, I have to live," I said. " You don't have to live in Virginia," Said Mr. Drummond. " Tear that thing up. I want you to stay here and write some plays about New York State, and help me organize the New York State Drama Project." I stayed.

and, without the permission, planted an immense concrete marker in the middle of a farmer's best cornfield. This made that farmer very conscious of the history of his farm, but the resluts were not of the best, and the matter ended in the Courts. Carl Carmer was writing about New York State. Harold Thompson had completed his splendid York State book of the folkways called: Body Boots and Britches, upon which I leaned heavily for some of my York State tales. The time seemed ripe to make the approach to the communities.

I set out to write some N ew York State plays, using these fine state stories, and our idea was to make these plays available to any individual or community group in the American North East, royalty free. We were to have plays about the important stories of every major community. This was a big job. It's one thing to collect stories. It's quite another to get down to the strenuous labor of playwriting, and it's still another to find other writers willing to help. However, by strenuous digging, I located over two hundred writers in New York State who were willing to assist . . . to write plays themselves, and to suggest stories, and help get their communities interested in the project. Soon the plays began to come in, and soon

I was flooded with a correspondence that threatened to sink me. At the same time I was trying to get some plays written myself. I selected as the first theme the trials and tribulations of the frontier ministers in New York State. And for a story I found in an old newspaper, an account of the experience of the Rev. Garrit Madneville, a Presbyterian preacher who journeyed twenty miles through a blizzard to perform a marryin' at a backwoods cabin . . . with a bride who wasn't too eager to get married, and a bridegroom who never came in from the woods until after sundown. When the minister arrived to join the pair, he found the bride hiding behind a quilt stretched across a corner of the cabin to make a dressing room, and refusing toccome out and be married; while the bridegroom stormed about the room yelling vengence and threatening to slay the whole tribe into which he was about to marry.

Naturally I couldn't show this minister journeying across in a play the forest, nor did I wish to show the bridegroom picking woodticks off himself . . . which was one of the reasons, I suspect, that the bride was so reluctant. But I made up a play in which the story was set in the minister's house, with the whole bunch coming to him to get married. I kept the quilt, and gave the minister a wife who tactfully

solved the whole affair by cutting a slit in the quilt so the young people might join hands, and got them happily married off. I mention this play because it was immediately successful and since it was written four years ago, has been produced several thousand times in the Northeast alone. Could I have collected even a couple of dollars royalty on this one play, I might be able to retire to that little farm that everybody has at the back of his mind . . . but in a Project of this kind, sacrifices were necessary. We felt that the stories belonged to the people, and that whether rich or poor, the people should have first chance at them.

The first year of the New York State Drama Project, we wrote and collected over one hundred and fifty fairly good York State plays, both short and full length. We circulated them through the American Agriculturalist Magazine, a publication in the Northeast with a half million circulation. Business boomed . . . and the editorial staff of the magazine was forced to hire a couple of new people . . . but they stuck with us. Meanwhile the drama in New York was getting a fine boost. Other states began to look to us for advice and assistance. Other creative Projects were started.

I wanted to try out our idea of bringing communities together through work of our Project. I was living at the time in the small town of Newfield, New York, near Ithaca, and for many years this town and surrounding country had been riven by feuds and quarrels. There were three Methodists Churches, none of which could agree. There was a large Checkslavian or Bohemian population up in the hills, and a large Finnish population. And, of course, there was the old American stock which went back to the Revolutionary War. This seemed a fertile territory to try out our ideas. The Finnish folk fought among themselves over politics. Many the high-power rifle I saw standing ready beside the kitchen door, with a box of ammunition waiting to repel, if need be, a conflicting neighbor. The Checks were suspicious of the Finns. The old American residents were suspicious of both, and suspicious of each other. The Methodists were agin everybody . . . including themselves. So I proposed to the village leaders that we set aside a friendship day when everybody could come to town, and see just what was what about their neighbors. The Finns were to bring their wood carving and handicraft, at which they are unsurpassed. The Checks were to bring their folk dances. The old Americans were to bring their historical relics, and their traditions . . . I couldn't think, for a while what the Methodists could bring . . . until I hit on the

idea of finding out just what it was that started their quarrel, and dramatized it, and got members of each church to act in it.

Everything seemed to go along fine. Then a few quarrels broke out among the Finns. Each side was trying to outdo the other, and they quibbled over anything. I remember one morning when I was only half awake, several Finns of both factions descended on me to settle their quarrel. One accused his neighbor of saying that the Kalevala - the Finnish national poem, was not a great epic. I adopted the only safe method I could think of, and reminded them that Longfellow had stolen the form of the Kalevala ~~(the Finns national poem)~~ when he wrote Hiawatha . . . and they immediately got sore at Longfellow, and ended up by shaking hands.

Several of the old Americans were heard to mutter that they had never thought of being friends with such and such and so and so until ~~that fellow Ford came to town~~ this friendship dog Dilco was forced upon them . . . but these decanting factions were overwhelmed and the day was a real success. The dances were wonderful. The Checks were in costume, the Finns had outdone themselves in their handicraft. The old Americans had a chance to relate their history. Fond memories and nostalgia were everywhere. T he historical One-Act plays were good. The speeches were not too long. The whole affair ended

with a great square-dance, and was definitely worth doing.. Adult education? I think it was. Just as I firmly believe that what we are trying to do here in Alberta may be called adult education,, in the sense that we are trying to inform the people of Alberta about Alberta's wealth of interesting folklore and history.. Possibly we can get some good Alberta plays written here, and that will help, too.. And when Mr. Bercuson get's his system of adult education really set up and going,, as I sincerely hope he may,, there will be a fine opportunity for adult classes to study the local history of their own region..... to work together to collect the lore of the countryside.... possibly to present the home grown play about some local character or hero.....these things will help to make the home-loving and well-informed citizen,, whom, as Mr. Bercuson rightly says,, "is the keystone of...democracy."